

# Family unfriendly dining

A popular California restaurant has installed a “no children” policy, including a prominent sign which reads, “No Strollers. No High Chairs. No Booster Seats.

Children crying or making loud noises are a distraction to other diners, and as such are not allowed in the dining room.” My brother sent me a link to the article detailing the situation and asked me my opinion. He was surprised by my response.

Patrick and I established a rule when Collin was an infant that if a restaurant has high chairs and a children’s menu, no one should complain about the presence of our children. We go out to eat rather frequently, leaning toward not-quite fast food places like Noodles & Company and Chipotle, who offer menu options to cover a broad range of dietary needs at a fair price in less than fifteen minutes. These are the kind of places where the occasional screaming child fades into the background of loud music and the bustle of diners rushing through their meals so they can get to their next destination.

Sometimes we find ourselves in fancier establishments where the meal itself is the destination. We walk in the door, towing three tidy little boys in collared shirts and khakis. There’s always at least one person who shoots us a look of disgust when we’re seated at a nearby table with two high chairs on the end. Usually the wait staff are courteous, offering crayons and children’s menus if they are available. I’ve seen some parents bring iPads to keep their children occupied, but we’ve chosen to train the boys to learn how to wait patiently without electronics (except in a few dire circumstances), mainly by enjoying conversation with each other and playing silly games like, “Find something red.” Collin and Frank do their best to eat neatly, but seeing as how they’re still trying to master their fine motor skills, sometimes they make a mess. Even in a restaurant, we still pick up under their chairs. If the server has been particularly attentive to our children’s needs, as are the phenomenal waitresses at Chopstix in Forest Hill, I tend to tip higher. Usually when we leave, that person who gave us the dirty look smiles and compliments their good behavior. Why do my children know how to act in a restaurant? Because they’ve had a lot of practice – at home and in the real world. Just playing “restaurant” teaches kids the behavior expected of them at a dinner table other than their own. And when restaurants open their doors to children, they are offering them the opportunity to gain the experience they will need as adult diners.



*Image via KSBW*

Dining in a restaurant with small children is possible, but only as long as families are

made to feel welcome. Chris Shake, the owner of Old Fisherman's Grotto in Monterey, California, has made it clear that he doesn't want children in his dining room. Some people are infuriated over this issue. "Kids have rights, too," they cry.

Though there are many important laws to protect children, none exist to guarantee them the right to be in any public place other than a classroom. Sadly, there are some people out there who just can't tolerate kids. Maybe they never got to be kids themselves or forgot what it is like, but for whatever reason, the mere sight, and particularly, sound, of children is agonizing for them.

Fortunately I am not, and presumably you are not, those people. Still, it's best to heed their signs when they are posted, lest we deprive ourselves of a good time by patronizing a stuffy establishment. And if there are no signs? I learned a long time ago to ignore fellow diners (and even parishoners) who glare at me if one of my children makes a sudden loud noise. It's the same squeal the young woman a table over makes when a small black box containing a very shiny ring opens before her.

It's the same resounding clunk the busboy makes when he drops a plastic tub of silverware. It's Grandma's loud cell phone conversation with her podiatrist in the back booth. It's that guy at the bar with the room-clearing sneeze...during allergy season. Kids are loud sometimes, but so are adults.

Noise seems to be the primary complaint of those who dislike children. It may be as simple as a sensitivity to the high pitches of their little voices or it could simply be how jarring and abrupt their noises can be. It's hard to control what comes out of children's mouths, such as the random happy screaming phase Frank went through just before he turned one. If we were in a restaurant, Patrick or I would take him outside immediately after the first scream, covering his mouth on the way out the door. I know I remember it, but I doubt any particular diner was scarred for life by it. Fortunately none of my boys had colic, but I imagine it must be difficult to go anywhere when the poor baby just can't stop crying. Collin's first two days were like that. Overwhelmed, I broke down and the nurse told me, "He didn't ask to be here." I think of that every time I hear a baby crying uncontrollably.

Thankfully, there are those people who understand when your kids are acting up. The kind who shoot you a kind, sympathetic smile when your jaw is so tense you're about to crack a tooth. Sometimes you can even find them in fancy restaurants and almost always in churches, but probably not at Old Fisherman's Grotto. And that's okay.

Some people go out to eat to celebrate special occasions, or maybe because it's Tuesday, and they're entitled to the right to a peaceful meal. But there will always be families like mine who run the risk of disturbing this special time, unless we are made aware up front that we are not welcome. Having a restaurant where rowdy crowds are not allowed is similar to housing developments designed exclusively for

college students or senior citizens. Though a particular group of people is being excluded, it's in the name of comfort for those being served and not as a means of intentionally harming the excluded group. If I'm excluded from something, I tend to conclude that I'm not missing out on any people, places, or things I would be interested in. My family doesn't plan on visiting Monterey any time soon, but if we do, I know where we won't be dining.